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FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5431
INFO RUEHNK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6287
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2616
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 2238
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 7091
RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 3321

C O N F I D E N T I A L ALGIERS 000293

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: ALGERIAN OFFICIALS PRIVATELY BACKTRACK ON
CRITICISM OF U.S. EMBASSY

REF: ALGIERS 255 AND 274

Classified By: Ambassador Robert Ford, reason 1.4 (d)

¶1. (C) MFA Counselor Ambassador Abdallah Baali (protect) pulled Ambassador aside after a discussion about the Western Sahara (septel) to discuss privately the Algerian government's public criticism of the American Embassy (refs). Baali said he had asked the Director General (roughly equivalent to Senior Director) at the Presidency on March 5 about the media clamour. According to Baali, the Presidency official responded that the Presidency was mystified. The Director General reportedly stated that he had spoken to Bouteflika personally about media stories and the Prime Minister's remarks, and Bouteflika had said there was nothing objectionable in the Embassy's various political meetings. Bouteflika, Baali concluded, knows what a foreign embassy's job is. Baali also said that he had asked Foreign Minister Medelci about the media stories on March 8 and Medelci denied ever having criticized the Embassy in any fashion. Baali then commented quietly that Prime Minister Belkhadem apparently had perceived short-term domestic political gains in attacking alleged American interference. Baali underlined that the GoA was not trying to impede Embassy meetings.

¶2. (C) On March 10 the Portuguese ambassador in Algiers told Ambassador that a group of EU ambassadors had raised the government's remarks privately with the Algerian MFA's Director General for European Affairs (Assistant Secretary equivalent) on March 8. The MFA official said that the American Embassy's activities were entirely within the bounds of the Vienna convention and the MFA had no objections.

¶3. (C) Ambassador and DCM called on senior members of Belkhadem's political party, the FLN, on March 8 and asked for clarification of the Prime Minister's remarks, including his warning to political parties and civil society representatives not to meet with foreign embassies. Saleh Goujil, a member of the seven-member FLN leadership committee, sought to assure the Ambassador that the Prime Minister's remarks, and those of Communications Minister Boukerzaza, were misquoted. Goujil noted with a wry smile that he as a political party leader was meeting the Ambassador and there was no problem.

¶4. (C) Comment: The media attention and government sniping have diminished since March 6. In March 6 and March 10 editorials the biggest selling newspaper, el-Khabar, mocked the government's criticism of the Embassy and said the government's secrecy about its plan to amend the constitution is the real problem. Our conclusion is that Belkhadem and his political allies are nervous about the criticism of their

constitutional amendment plan that they know we are hearing in many of our private meetings. (One rumored element of the amendment plan would create a new post of vice president and put Belkhadem in it as the eventual successor to Bouteflika. This would stir plenty of controversy among the Algerian top leadership, however.) We believe Belkhadem and his allies used the independent press, which is itself anxious to sell papers with big scoops, to warn us off and at the same time galvanize domestic political support for the amendment. Many more sophisticated Algerians with whom Embassy staff have spoken understand the PM's gambit and shrug it off. Some other contacts appear to be more careful about meeting us in the wake of the PM's warning. We have seen no public retractions of the Prime Minister's remarks or those allegedly made by the Foreign Minister and we likely will not.

FORD